

County sees gains on China trip

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In meeting after meeting with Chinese government officials, county Supervisor Gary Ovitt didn't talk politics much with his communist counterparts.

"We figured that's an area that we probably ought not tread on," said the self-described "very conservative" supervisor.

Luckily, the fodder for smoother conversations was at hand: Business.

On Sunday, San Bernardino County officials and 22 representatives of area businesses returned from an eight-day trip to the Chinese cities of Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Hong Kong.

After 130 meetings with government and business officials, Economic Development Director Brian McGowan said its participants had lined up more than \$65 million in potential contracts.

The county liked the trip so much, Supervisor Gary Ovitt said, that it's thinking of staying: He and other supervisors are interested in establishing a permanent trade office in Hong Kong.

"We'd have a representative over there who would be very familiar with our issues and speak their language," Ovitt said.

The county delegation's mixture of business and supervisors - both Josie Gonzales and Assessor-elect Bill Postmus also attended - proved ideal for striking deals in a state-run economy, McGowan said.

"Business doesn't occur in China without government involvement," he said. "So having the supervisors sanction the trade mission and the businesses that participated lent it a lot of credibility."

More work would be necessary to bring the potential business alliances made on the trip to fruition, McGowan said.

But once the deals suggested on the trip are put down on paper, he said, the county would look into hiring a permanent trade representative in China, both for business matchmaking and to encourage Chinese investment in San Bernardino County.

"The important point is that the supervisors saw the potential" of China, McGowan said. "What it really did is lay the groundwork for a comprehensive international trade (program) from here on out."

For a county to hire a permanent trade representative in Hong Kong would be novel, McGowan said, but potentially very lucrative.

"It's appropriate for a county with \$18 billion of import-export business," he said, though he also said the county would not commit to the plan until it had time to give it more consideration.

Jeff Dennis, a plant manager for Rancho Cucamonga-based Rhino Machine and Engineering, said the trip had introduced him to a plastic mold manufacturer that had been unable to access the U.S. market because it lacked an American partner should its products need repairs.

Now the Chinese company, he said, "wants to include us in their brochure as a company they cooperate with."

The potential contracts Rhino arranged could be worth as much as \$1 million a year, he said.